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SUBJECT: EID HOLIDAYS IN INDONESIA -- THE MASS EXODUS BEGINS

REF: JAKARTA 1465

¶1. SUMMARY: With the close of Ramadan fasting approaching, Indonesia--the world's largest Muslim country by population--is bracing for a mass exodus of millions from urban areas to home villages. Almost 25 million people are expected to head home during the two-week period surrounding the Eid-ul-Fitr holiday. Talking a good game (and aware of the political downsides), authorities say they have taken robust measures to ensure that Indonesians enjoy a safe holiday season. These measures range from adding flights to making sure that there are adequate food and money supplies. That said, snarls are expected. In the meantime, Indonesia has begun to prepare for the Hajj in late-November. END SUMMARY.

CELEBRATING AN IMPORTANT MUSLIM HOLIDAY

¶2. With government and many private offices closed, Indonesia's over 200 million Muslims are preparing for a major holiday. The return to one's hometown during the Eid holiday is called "mudik." During this timeframe, almost 25 million Indonesians will flood out of metropolitan areas as Ramadan comes to a close and the celebration of the end of the fasting month begins. The holiday, known as "Eid-ul-Fitr" or in Bahasa Indonesia as "Lebaran," is a time to spend with family and friends and to share with those less fortunate. The Eid holiday is slated to start on September ¶20.

TRYING TO ENSURE SAFETY AND THE FOOD SUPPLY

¶3. Aware of the political downsides, the government says it is doing its best to make sure that the season goes painlessly. In the past, the Eid-ul-Fitr travel period has been plagued by a high number of traffic fatalities, travel nightmares and food shortages. This year, however, authorities promised to make the travel period as safe and painless as possible. They permitted airlines to add 188 flights, increased the number of trains, deployed thousands of additional police to ensure that rail lines are not stolen, and inspected safety standards of shipping vessels and ferries along the busiest travel routes. Authorities have also added additional gas stations along major highways. Trucks, unless transporting food, are banned from travel during the four days before and two days after September 20.

¶4. That said, motorcycle travel is notoriously dangerous during the Eid holiday. Last year, over three million people traveled by motorcycle and around 400 people died in motorcycle accidents. Authorities passed a much stricter safety law this year that prohibits travel with more than two passengers. (Note: In Indonesia, it is not uncommon for families to travel with three or more people on motorcycles.) It will be up to the police to enforce the new measure.

¶5. The government has also issued many safety warnings such as: "Don't take too much luggage"; "Don't wear jewelry"; "Don't trust strangers"; "Beware of hypnotists" (this latter warning is of somewhat obscure provenance); and, "Rest before driving." The government has also delayed the sale of economy train tickets until the day of travel in an attempt to ensure that tickets are not bought up by scalpers thus denying affordable tickets to many. (Note: Sometimes in the press of crowds at train stations, people are trampled to death or severely injured. This has occurred when potential passengers cannot buy tickets and panic.)

¶6. Eid-ul-Fitr is a time for giving and most travelers will be expected to give money to their families. The new Rp. 2,000 bill (approximately 20 cents) is in high demand--this is particularly popular to give to children. Authorities have worked with banks to ensure adequate supplies of small denomination bills. The government has also worked to make sure that ample food has been stockpiled. There is an increased demand for basic food commodities during Ramadan and Eid as Indonesian Muslims often host friends and families for meals.

¶7. Somewhat controversially during a timeframe that is, in part, about sharing, the GOI has taken steps to curb begging. Large numbers of poor rural Indonesians flock to the cities seeking handouts during the holidays. This influx prompted the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) to issue a fatwa (religious decree) outlawing begging and also banning Muslims from collecting donations on street. In 2007, the Jakarta administration passed a law forbidding begging on the streets. Lightly enforced in the past, authorities have

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applied the law this year and have been busy conducting daily raids in which over 1,500 beggars have been arrested so far. The main target of these raids, according to the GOI, are organized crime syndicates which round up people from the countryside and bus them into Jakarta to collect money. That said, civil society groups have fiercely criticized the government for being "heartless" and for ignoring the rights of the poor.

PREPARING FOR THE HAJJ

¶8. As Ramadan comes to an end, Indonesian Muslims are also preparing for the annual pilgrimage to Mecca known as the Hajj. Making the Hajj is the fifth pillar of Islam and an obligation that must be carried out once in a Muslim's lifetime. Indonesia, as the largest Muslim-majority country in the world, sends more pilgrims to Mecca than any other country. The Ministry of Religious Affairs announced recently that all preparations for the 2009 Hajj had been completed, from arranging transportation and housing to issuing the controversial meningitis vaccine for the over 200,000 Indonesians who will travel to Saudi Arabia in late-November.

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